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### 6 The Wood-Burner is Back

A fireplace can be fun and functional. Finding the right one can be a challenge.

Gary Turbak

### 10 The Holly: Ancient Symbol of Christmas

The use of holly to celebrate Christmastime goes back to the very origins.

Henry N. Ferguson

### 18 These Men Are in Stitches

Take a tip from Rosie Grier—liberation goes both ways.

Fanny-Maude Evans

### 31 Delayed Mail

It was clearly mistaken identity. The man they wanted to kidnap was Harvey Pendleton . . .

Jack Ritchie

### Departments

1 Message	26 Travel: Offbeat Wanderings
4 It's Your Business: Merger	29 Major Projects: AR
13 News of the Lodges	30 The Fraternal Corner
21 News of the State Associations	34 Elks National Foundation/ Joy of Giving
22 Elks National Service Commission	35 Visits of Leonard J. Bristol
23 You and Retirement: RV Life	38 Elks Family Shopper
24 Christmas Charities	

### Cover: The Holly

Jim Lavengood

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# DELAYED MAIL

by Jack Ritchie



■ It was clearly a case of mistaken identity.

They thought they'd kidnapped Harvey Pendleton. We do look a bit alike, I suppose, but he is the owner of the Pendleton Snowmobile Company and I am not. I am merely one of his clerks.

It had been near noon on Monday when Mr. Pendleton opened his office door, looked out, and discovered that I was the nearest human being.

He tossed me his car keys. "Wilbur, gas up my car and have the oil and tires checked. I'll be driving to Madison this afternoon and I won't have time to do it myself."

"Yes, sir," I said. I put on my top-coat and went downstairs to the parking lot behind the plant. I approached the Lincoln in the parking space clearly labeled *Pendleton*.

Just as I inserted the key into the car

lock, a green and white sedan drew up behind me and two large men leaped out. They seized me and shoved me onto the rear floor of their automobile.

One of them planted his feet firmly on my back so that I could not rise and the other jumped behind the wheel of the car and we sped off, tires squealing.

"Now look here," I demanded. "What is this all about?"

The man with his feet on my back said, "What does it look like?"

I tried an intelligent guess. "A kidnapping?"

"That's right, mister."

I allowed myself to chuckle. "You have the wrong person. My name is Crawford. Wilbur Crawford. I suspect that you are really after Mr. Pendleton."

The man above me was not buying. "Shut up."

I tried several more times to tell

them that they had the wrong man, but all it got me were some kicks in the ribs, so I resigned myself to giving up for the time being.

It was a rather long drive, especially for me on the floor of the car. According to my wrist watch, it was nearly two hours before the car finally pulled onto a crunching driveway and came to a stop.

From the little conversation the two of them exchanged en route, I learned that the man driving was Max, and the individual with the feet, Clarence.

He removed them from my back now. "All right, get out."

I saw that we were in a rather dreary countryside and parked in the driveway next to a farmhouse. My first thought was to make a run for it, but Clarence had a firm grip on my arm and pushed me toward the house.



Once inside, I spoke up again. "My name is Wilbur Crawford. Not Pendleton. And I do not own the Pendleton Snowmobile Company. I am merely a clerk in his employ."

"Sure," Clarence said. "Sure." Nevertheless, they led me to the second floor and a small bedroom.

Clarence shoved me inside and locked the door, leaving me alone. I went immediately to the single small window. I found that it was thoroughly covered with a heavy wire grill bolted to the window frame. Clearly preparations had been made for someone's confinement.

I looked down at their car still in the driveway. Perhaps it had been stolen, but on the other hand, would they risk driving a stolen car for nearly two hours with a kidnap victim inside? Perhaps the car really did belong to one of them. I decided that there might be some point in memorizing the license plate number.

I noticed a small ventilation grating in the floor and got down on my hands and knees. Below me I saw Clarence and Max watching TV.

Eventually the TV programming reached the five o'clock news.

A Wilbur Crawford had been kidnapped this afternoon from the parking lot behind the Pendleton Snowmobile factory. A witness had seen him being hustled into a car by two men. The witness had been too far away to get the license plate number, but he described the auto as being a late model green and white sedan.

The police theorized that the kidnappers might have abducted the victim in the mistaken belief that he was Harvey Pendleton, president of the

Pendleton Snowmobile Company.

Below me, Clarence swore, and got out of his easy chair. I heard him coming up the stairs.

He unlocked the door and stared at me. "So you really aren't Harvey Pendleton?"

"That is what I have been trying to tell you."

He glared. "You're worth nothing to me. Absolutely nothing."

I smiled. "In that case, you might as well let me go."

There was a silence and then he said, "What makes you think that we have any idea of letting you go? No matter who you are?"

I cleared my throat. Clearly this was a moment to buy time. "On the other hand, I may not be worthless to you after all. You should still be able to get your money. Send the ransom note to Mr. Pendleton himself."

"What good would that do? Why would Pendleton give us \$200,000 for your hide? You said yourself that you're only one of his clerks."

"Yes, but do you think that Mr. Pendleton would dare *not* pay my ransom?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"Because of the publicity involved. What would the newspapers say about him if he flatly decided not to ransom me and left me to my fate? Whatever that might be. People would be upset by his lack of humanity. They would stop buying his snowmobiles. His factory would have to close. Do you think he would want that to happen just because of a measly \$200,000? But if he came up with the money, he would be hailed by the entire nation."

Clarence rubbed his jaw. "You might have something there at that."

I nodded eagerly. "The entire country would begin buying his snowmo-

biles. He'd have to expand his factory. Money would come pouring in."

"All right," Clarence said. "Don't oversell it."

He took me downstairs and handed me a ball-point pen and some paper. "Start writing what I tell you."

He dictated. They wanted \$200,000 in small unmarked bills for my return. They would give Pendleton a week to get the money together and then they would get in touch with him again.

When I finished the letter, I addressed an envelope and affixed a stamp Clarence handed me.

He shoved the envelope into his pocket, took me upstairs, and locked me in again.

I suspected that now Clarence was keeping me alive just in case he needed me once more—to write another note, or to prove to someone that I was still alive and therefore worth the ransom.

Monday passed. Tuesday. Wednesday.

By Thursday morning, I began to wonder if the letter had ever gotten to Mr. Pendleton at all.

At two o'clock that afternoon I was at the small window when I saw the cars parking about a half a mile down the country road. Men began getting out of the vehicles and fanning across the fields, sneaking up to the house.

I was at the floor grating watching Clarence and Max before their television set when the state troopers stormed into the living room. Clarence and Max were caught completely by surprise and they surrendered meekly.

When I got downstairs, Clarence was still blinking at the suddenness of events. "How did you find us?" he asked the captain of the state troopers.

The captain smiled. "It was the envelope you used to send the ransom note. The zip code was wrong and so it was delayed. In fact the zip code was so wrong that we wondered if maybe Mr. Crawford wasn't trying to tell us something—like an automobile license plate number. We ran it through the Motor Vehicle Department and came up with your green and white sedan."

Max looked at Clarence reproachfully. "How could you mail a letter with my license plate number on it?"

Clarence shrugged. "Why am I supposed to remember the license number of *your* car?"

When I returned to my job, I was something of a hero. But only until the next Monday morning when Mr. Pendleton opened his office door, looked out, and discovered I was nearest.

He tossed me his car keys. "Wilbur, gas up my car and have the oil and tires checked. I'll be driving to Madison this afternoon and I won't have time to do it myself."

This time I was not kidnapped. ■

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